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Islam in China

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When you, kind reader, think of the "Islamic World," is China included? When you think about the kinds of religions practiced in China, does Islam come to mind? You will undoubtedly conjure up images of Daoism, Buddhism, *qigong* and other body-cultivation techniques, and perhaps Confucian family rituals like "ancestor worship." Connecting "Islam" to "China" may also bring to mind sectarian violence involving some members of the Turkic Uyghur community in northwestern China. Although Muslims have lived in China since the seventh century and there are today somewhere between twenty and sixty million Muslims in China, very few histories of China and very few works that describe or analyze the "Islamic World" include any discussion of Islam in China.[1] This is a surprising lack of recognition given that there are almost as many Muslims in China as the entire population of Syria or Saudi Arabia, and more than in Malaysia!

There are probably several reasons for this omission, including the assumptions that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Chinese civilization, and that Islam is somehow more monolithic than other world religions and demands a uniformity among its adherents that overrides any possible accommodation with local or native culture. Two well-known scholarly treatments of Islam in China make the first argument explicitly, and general discussion of Muslims by the popular press conveys the latter all too vividly. However, the reality of Islamic belief generally, and certainly in China in particular, could not be more different from these assumptions. Muslims can be found in every corner of China, there is a very wide variety of practice of Islam across China, Islam is now an accepted and recognized part of the religious landscape of China, and most Muslims in China would object to being characterized as fundamentally at odds with their home society and state.[2] Islam's normative position in China today owes much to its long history in China and to how citizenship is defined in the modern Chinese nation.

HISTORY OF ISLAM IN CHINA

China has been home to many foreign religions for millennia, including Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity. While Islam arrived in China later than most of these other religions, all of them reached an accommodation with or encompassment of Chinese culture. This is perhaps best seen in the fact that they were all denoted as a kind of "teaching" (*jiao*), and their sacred buildings were all referred to by the

same Chinese character, *si*, which originally meant an official, or imperial, institution, and were, in terms of architecture, virtually indistinguishable from imperial or administrative complexes.[3] The application of that secular imperial architectural style and terminology to religious buildings was intentional, since the power of the Chinese imperium radiated out across the land via its architectural features as much as in the actions of its officials.

Tradition holds that the first Muslim to enter China was an envoy from the Arab state of Dashiguo (on the Arabian Peninsula) to the Tang emperor Gaozong in 651 CE. However, there are no records of mosques having been built at the Tang capital, unlike sacred buildings of other foreign religions. In fact, the earliest mosques in China are all in port cities in the southeast, the earliest being in the important city of Guangzhou (Canton). This is not surprising, since the majority of Muslims who entered China in that era were merchants who came by sea, bringing their religion with them. This first wave of Muslims did not establish Islam as a normative religion in China in any substantial fashion; until the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, Islam was only practiced by foreigners in the great trading cities in southeastern China.

The second great source of Islam in China was the Mongol conquests, which began in the early thirteenth century and did not conclude until the mid-1270s. Curiously, it was this wave of Muslim immigrants that really established Islam as a part of the Chinese religious scene. Since the Mongols were a relatively small group they had to rely on others to maintain their power over the settled societies that they conquered. In China they brought in large numbers of personnel from Central Asia, Persia, and points farther west. Many of these people, known collectively as "*semu*" (literally "colored eyes"; in Yuan-period sources this compound meant "various types of foreigners"), were practicing Muslims, and while they were subjects of the Mongols like the Chinese, they actually dominated much of the political and commercial landscape of China at that time. More important, these people settled permanently in China, where they became accepted in their adopted communities, usually as members of the literati class.

The Ming government (1368–1644), which evicted the Mongols from China back to the steppe, continued to employ many of these same personnel in civil and military positions, and was actually much more multiethnic and tolerant than traditional histories have stated. It was also during this era that Chinese Muslim literati brought Islam firmly into the realm of "Chinese religions," and when the shift in identity from "Muslims in China" to "Chinese Muslims" was made.[4] The state sponsored the translation of Muslim terms by an imperial translation bureau, it established the madrasa educational system, and it aided or at least tolerated the production of writing on Islam and eventually the translation of the Quran. As Zvi Ben-Dor Benite eloquently demonstrates, this literary production by Chinese Muslim writers resulted in a body of literature written mainly in Chinese, but also in Persian and Arabic, of over one hundred texts. This genre that he calls Han Kitab (combining the Chinese word for "Chinese" and the Arabic word for "book") was based in a fundamental dialogue, an "encompassment" between Confucianism and Islam that was quite different from "accommodation," which implies an essential element of "sinicization."[5] It shows the true degree to which those writers were both Chinese and Muslim. That process of dialogue, or encompassment, started in the Mongol era and continued throughout the succeeding Ming and

Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, down to the present. It spawned a mosque-building and educational program that was nourished by these thinkers and their writings, including Chinese translations of the Quran, and was the key to transforming Islam into a normal and widely accepted part of the larger religious world in China.[6]

The story of Islam in the last decades of the empire and during the Republican era is complex and rather different from earlier times. It is colored for many by the violent Muslim-led rebellions in northwestern and southwestern China. That history is often cited as evidence for the intrinsic incompatibility of Muslims with Chinese culture or the Chinese premodern or contemporary state.[7] But it is equally clear that Islam was also thriving in and posed no threat to many local communities across China in that same period. In fact, it was in the Republican period (1912–1949) that the first regional and national Chinese Muslim associations were started. Of course, all religions were questioned and eventually repressed during the zealous nationalist campaigns ushered in after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, especially the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. It has only been in the post-Mao era with China's "opening up" under Deng Xiaoping and his successors that Islam, like other religions, has again been allowed to flourish in China. In the People's Republic, Muslims and their religion inhabit two spheres, that of the citizen of the state and of the national minority. In order to understand the normative role of Islam in China today, we must examine how these spheres operate and interrelate.[8]

CITIZENS AND MINORITIES IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The People's Republic of China sees all people living in the nation as citizens, regardless of their religious views. At the same time, all citizens have been categorized into one of fifty-six different "nationality" groups (*minzu*). This notion originated in late nineteenth-century Japan and was adopted by Sun Yat-sen as a founding principle of the new Republic. The founders of the People's Republic elaborated on those principles with borrowings from Stalin's ideas that a "nationality" could be identified by common territory, language, economy, and psychology, and set out to identify every "nationality" group in China. The idea was to separate these nascent groups from religion in order to understand and control all of the peoples who lived in the territory inherited from the Qing state. Of the fifty-six separate nationalities in China, the Han Chinese are the largest group, followed by fifty-five "national minority" groups (*shaoshu minzu*).

There are currently ten separate officially recognized groups of Muslims in China, and nine of these groups are ethnically and linguistically Turkic or Turko-Mongolian (Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Dongxiang, Salar, Bonan, and Tatars), who live predominantly in northern and northwestern China (Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia). The tenth group of Muslims, called "Hui" (often translated as "Chinese Muslim"), are the single largest group of Muslims in China. Of the fifty-five official national minority groups, the Hui are also unique because they have only their religion, and not any specific regional or phenotypic features, to

unify them. In fact, Hui are often called "Han Muslims" because they are, apart from their practice of Islam, indistinguishable from their Han Chinese neighbors. This chapter focuses on the Hui Chinese Muslims.

ISLAMIC BELIEF AND CULTURE

Broadly speaking, the vast majority of Hui Muslims in China are Sunni who follow the Hanafi school of Islamic law (known in Chinese as *gedimu* from Arabic *al qadim*, "ancient"). That tradition also informed the Sino-Muslim literati tradition and production of Han Kitab literature discussed above. Less well known but equally important to the Hui "community" was the flourishing of Islamic popular periodical literature written and published by Hui scholars starting in the 1920s in several areas of China. Monthly journals told Hui readers how to pray and worship correctly, related stories of important historic Hui figures, and disseminated reminiscences and stories by local Hui writers. In fact, these Hui writers were following the larger trend of producing a new kind of popular literature for the masses that arose across China as part of the modernizing goals of the May Fourth movement from 1919. One important result of that literary blossoming was that for the first time attention was paid to creating a standardized system of transliterating Islamic terms into standard Chinese. After things settled down following the tumultuous Mao years, a glossary of hundreds of Arabic and Persian Islamic terms used by Ningxia Hui Muslims in their religious and daily life, but which were also thought to be used in common by Hui across China, was published in the 1980s.

MODERNITY AND BELONGING

The post-Mao (post-socialist?) era of economic openness has opened up every religious community and person to new possibilities and problems in China, and the benefits and risks are quite firmly linked to one's *minzu* identity. The Hui have taken advantage of the new spirit of openness and globalization to rescue Islam from perceptions that it is a marginal, dangerous group and to present it as a normative religion in contemporary China. Hui are now routinely appointed as officials in many parts of China. Religious or Islamic names now appear again alongside Chinese names on Hui business cards. Scholarship by and about Hui history and contemporary issues now also is a part of the academy, especially with the regular publication of the academic journal *Huizu yanjiu* (Hui Studies) since 1991. Hui also openly operate schools that teach Arabic language, Islamic history and religion, and Chinese history and culture, with up-to-date websites (such as the English-language website of the Kaiyuan Arabic Institute in central Yunnan province—www.kyaz.com/English/Index.html), faculty from other parts of the Muslim world, and students from many areas of China.

Chinese Muslims have also been a part of the state's newfound role in the international arena. Hui now regularly go on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and delegations of visitors from other countries regularly visit prominent Hui mosques and communities. Leading Chinese universities have also begun to sponsor academic conferences that are intended to promote

China's goodwill to Islamic states; Nanjing University and Harvard University have had several annual conferences that examine new dialogue between Chinese Confucian and Islamic cultures, and Yunnan University now houses a Sino-Iranian Institute that studies and promotes historic and contemporary Sino-Iranian relations. Promoting the notion of Islam as a normal part of China's history and contemporary society is beneficial both for the state's growing international interests and for the Hui in China.

Another visible manifestation of the strength of Hui communities is in the restoration of historic mosques and the proliferation of new mosques. Many traditional mosques have been repaired and now function both as sacred and tourist sites. Hui communities have also been investing in new mosques that are striking for their adoption of seemingly global Islamic architectural styles: a centralized multistory mosque with a green-tiled dome and white-plaster or tile exteriors adorned with highly stylized Arabic calligraphy. Most interesting, however, is the fact that these new mosques also borrow from Chinese secular modern architectural trends that include multistory concrete buildings with white-tile skins and copious use of clear glass (ubiquitous in new commercial and government urban buildings). Because these new, modern mosques can also be found in almost every city in China, they give the impression of Hui modernity and spiritual and economic vitality. They are firmly part of the "new" China.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY?

This chapter has tried to address two common perceptions: first that China is never considered as a part of the "Islamic World," and second, that Islam is not a part of the normative Chinese religious landscape. Using the largest group of Muslims in China, the Hui, as our case study, it should be apparent that the sheer number of Muslims in China, not to mention the liveliness of their faith, makes China's inclusion in the Islamic World an easy and natural conclusion.

Addressing the second perception, that Islam is somehow historically or culturally not part of China and Chinese society, is more complicated. There are some Muslims living in China, especially some in the Uyghur community, who would side with this view. But their issues and problems with the Chinese state and society have been framed at least as much by state policies toward ethnic minorities and access to resources in specific areas where some minorities live as with any inherent antipathy against Islam. By contrast, the Hui Muslims serve as a good case study to investigate the normality of Islam in China.

Apart from their shared religious affiliation as part of the orthodox Sunni tradition, is there anything that really unifies all of the Hui Muslims into a group with a shared identity? The notion of a shared identity might be seen as a key to regarding any religion as normative in a nation. There is no central religious authority for Islam in China. And unlike other Muslim groups in China, the Hui are not tied to a specific geography, culture, or ethnicity, and local or regional identities matter greatly. Being Muslim is, for the Hui, no different from being Buddhist or Daoist for other Chinese people, since the linguistic, social, and cultural particularities of specific locales transcend or at least compete with any wider religious identity, and also tend to shape specific religious practice.

The fungible nature of their *minzu* identity has also made it easier for Hui to accept their

official status. As Dru Gladney has argued, successful accommodation to minority status is a measure of the degree to which these Muslims allow and are comfortable with a reconciliation of Islam to Chinese culture.[9] The encompassment practiced by Sino-Muslim thinkers in late-imperial China that enabled them to be full members of both the Islamic and Confucian literati elite circles continues to inform their identity as good and loyal Hui citizens of the People's Republic who practice one of the world religions long resident in China. It is no surprise to find historic or new mosques in every part of China, and of course the famous Muslim *qingzhen* ("pure and clean") restaurants are ubiquitous and well known even among Han Chinese as good restaurants. It should thus be obvious that Islam is no outlier in the constellation of Chinese religions, and that China should be considered to be a part of the wider Islamic World.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Donald Leslie, *Islam in Traditional China* (Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986) gives a historical survey of Islamic teachings and groups in China into the late-imperial period, while Michael Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui Community* (Curzon, 1999), covers Hui communities in nineteenth-and twentieth-century China, and the role of Sufism in Hui communities and in Chinese Islam generally. Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese* (Harvard University Press, 1991), is an anthropological study of the Hui Muslims, centered in northwestern China. Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford University Press, 1992), traces the emergence of racial categories in late-imperial China and the modern system of ethnic minorities invoked by the Chinese state since 1949.

NOTES

1. The most recent official census puts the number of Muslims at a conservative twenty-two million. Other estimates range from forty to sixty million. One interesting example of this general omission is John L. Esposito, *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), which treats China and Soviet Central Asia in one short chapter. That China is included at all is actually more progressive than most works on Islam outside the Middle East and Saudi Arabia.

2. Some Uyghurs in the northwestern province of Xinjiang argue that they are historically and culturally separate from China, and see themselves as a persecuted ethno-religious minority. This chapter does not discuss the Uyghurs, focusing instead on the largest group of Muslims in China, the Chinese Muslims.

3. Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, "China's Earliest Mosques," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 3 (2008): 330–61, especially makes this point clear.

4. Donald Daniel Leslie, *Islam in Traditional China: A Short History to 1800* (Canberra: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986).

5. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

Asia Center, 2005).

6. Donald Daniel Leslie, *Islamic Literature in Chinese* (Canberra: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1981), provides an exhaustive list of these early Chinese Muslim writers and their works, as well as other prominent Chinese Muslim writers in the late-imperial era.

7. See, for example, Michael Dillon, *China's Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), and Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002). It is in part due to that complex history of the emergence of the contemporary nation-state out of imperial China that some Uyghurs claim they should be separate from China.

8. See for discussion Dru C. Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?" *Religion in China Today, The China Quarterly Special Issues*, New Series, no. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 145–61, and Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

9. Gladney, "Islam in China."